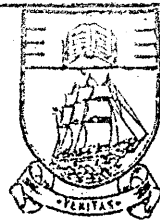


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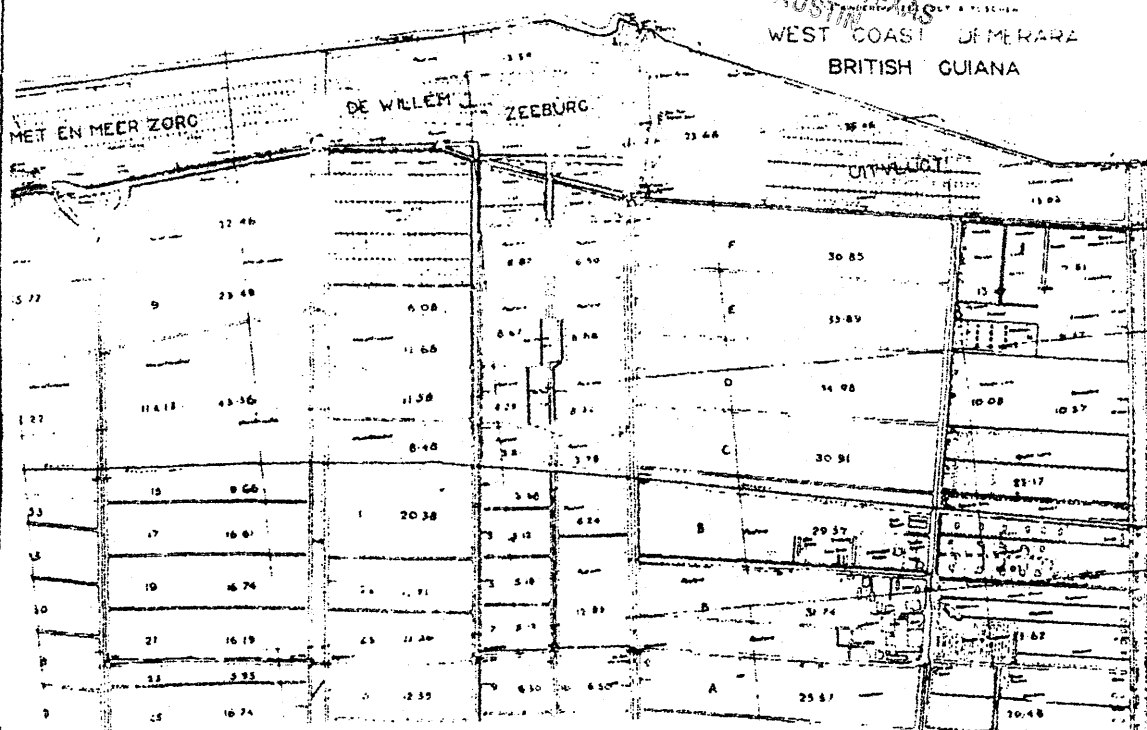
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## INDENTURED INSURGENCY ON THE SUGAR ESTATES OF BRITISH GUIANA: 1869 – 1913

by

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During the last phase of slavery and especially during the period of Apprenticeship, the planters tried to extract as much labour as possible from their black slaves, which in turn meant treating them with even greater harshness than usual. W.L. Burn suggests that the ex-slaves' refusal to provide wage labour on the plantations after Emancipation, was directly linked with their experience during the pre - 1838 period<sup>1</sup>. That the planters succeeded to a large extent in their efforts to ensure a higher production is seen in the following:

TABLE A: SUGAR EXPORTS (Hogsheads) 1827 - 1862 <sup>2</sup>	
6-Year Period	Hogsheads Exported
1827 - 1832	399,161
1833 - 1838	357,319
1839 - 1844	224,346
1845 - 1850	230,938
1851 - 1856	305,517
1857 - 1862	372,468

By 1862, the planters seemed to have manipulated themselves into a position (once again) to establish command over labour. This recapture of command over labour was reflected in the fact that "although the villagers had begun to show a renewed interest in estate work by the early 1860's, they were compelled to work at reduced wages."<sup>3</sup>

Some of the more farsighted planters anticipated the impending withdrawal of the majority of the freed Blacks of their labour at the wages offered by the planters. They felt the need to effect certain post-emancipation labour adjustments in order, first, to counteract the labour insta-

bility following the ex-slaves movement away from the estates to pursue an existence of lessened dependence on the sugar estates and, secondly, to ensure the continued viability of planter enterprise. These labour adjustments involved the immigration into the colony of West Indians, Europeans (mainly Portuguese) and Chinese. But India surpassed all the other sources of immigrant labour both in terms of duration and volume. Some 236, 205<sup>4</sup> Indians came between 1838-1917 in almost 300 ships.

An impressive volume of historical writing has been devoted to the study of Indian Indentured servitude in Guyana and other parts of the World, but very little of the historical scholarship on Indian Immigration concerns Indentured insurgency on the sugar estates of British Guiana. This relative paucity which is bemoaned by Dr. Ramnarine<sup>5</sup> seems to reinforce at least two still prevalent myths about the Indian Indentured Servant in British Guiana. The official record abounds with descriptions of the "docile", coolie.<sup>6</sup> The second oft-projected myth, is that the Indentured servant was contented with his lot on the sugar estate and never challenged his semi-slave status and the attendant reduction of self. The present research attempts an examination of the phenomenon of indentured insurgency - strikes, minor and major disturbances and full-scale riots - on the sugar estates of British Guiana up to the beginning of the First World War. Many perhaps well - intentioned, but decidedly mistaken, historians and colonial officers, held the view that the indentured servant

was by nature docile and would therefore submit to all the mechanisms of labour force control set up by the white plantocracy to protect and perpetuate a set of economic interests defined by the planters themselves.

The vast number of colonial despatches, reports, statistics and other records which were so painstakingly compiled about Indian Immigration were not always accurate and were probably meant to placate both a vigilant Anti-Slavery Movement and a sensitive British public opinion. For example, in 1889 there were at least 12 strikes on the sugar estates in the colony but the Immigration Agent General's returns included no statistics and communicated that there was "comparative freedom from strikes"<sup>7</sup>. Omissions of this type were also probably meant to depict the office of the Immigration Agent General, who acted as "Protector" of Immigrants, as being generally successful in its protective role. Regardless of the motive, however, reports such as these tended to indulge prevailing Victorian attitudes to the Indian races:

The average Indian was . . . a born gentleman . . . his chief characteristics were still said to be reserve and docility, gentleness, pity and procrastination<sup>8</sup>

These characteristics were supposedly developed after the Indians had "for the past 800 years been subdued by every strange people that had the power to invade their country".<sup>9</sup> These views underwent a hurried re-examination after the 1857 Mutiny in India:

. . . we have seen by recent events such outbursts of fanaticism, cruelty, bloodshed, and crime, that we wonder how many that knew

them thirty years ago could give them such and so splendid a character<sup>10</sup>

Governor Henry Light had remarked in 1846 that the plaint immigrant labour force would have a "moral" effect on the Africans in teaching them the habits of industry.<sup>11</sup> Characteristically, the governor had interpreted as the "innate laziness" of the black, the ex-slaves' preference to withdraw from the estate rather than being "willing to undertake all aspects of cultivation at the proffered task rates".<sup>12</sup> Edgar Erickson makes reference to the fact that the Indian Indentured servants were seen as well-limbed and active, docile, easily managed ....<sup>13</sup> Governor Barkly also found them to be "the most easily managed people in the world".<sup>14</sup> Apart from these prevalent notions of Indian docility many colonial officers perceived the Indentured servants to be children: "The East Indian is ignorant. They are like children hence they have to be treated like children."<sup>15</sup> Governor Harris of Trinidad in a letter to Earl Grey attempted to justify this thus: "They must be treated like children — and wayward ones, too — the former, from the state in which they arrive: the latter from their habits and religion".<sup>16</sup>

The record does not seem to substantiate the various claims of Indian Indentured "docility"; nor does the Indentured labourer of the nineteenth century British Guianese sugar plantation emerge as the "child" who was brought up under the paternity of British Colonial officialdom. It is one of the objectives of this study to examine whether the Indians responded to the pressures brought to bear upon them

on the sugar estates in the ways depicted by the "official" records and returns. These returns were compiled by officials who had a vested interest in displaying the functions of a stewardship which they were enjoined to discharge. After all, there were many attempts to justify Indian immigration on moral grounds. These unfortunate victims of floods, famine and general destitution in India were rescued when they were contracted to work in the British Guiana plantations and others around the world. . . The fact that many opted to return to India and many others attempted to escape to Trinidad and Venezuela (this will be developed at a later stage of this study), seems to indicate that many were not too happy with being rescued.

It is perhaps true to say that "The Indian's patience and capacity to suffer was almost limitless"<sup>17</sup> but throughout the duration of the Indentureship scheme, resistance both active and passive remained a fact of life on the sugar estates. The first batch of "hill coolies", registered their unacceptance in no uncertain way when, after being subjected to much of the ill-treatment reminiscent of slavery, they conducted what can technically be called the first strike against conditions of service and their return arrangements. After arriving on 5 May, 1838, they complained about lack of food, proper utensils and tobacco. The Anti-Slavery Society brought charges of ill-treatment against the authorities after there were complaints of being whipped, put in stocks and the infliction of corporal punishment by overseers. A Commission of Inquiry was set up, but although their report was highly unfavour-

able, the governor felt that the coolies were fairly contented. The five-year contract under which this batch was inducted expired on 30 December 1842 and when by 16 January, 1843 no return ships had arrived to take them back to India, they withdrew their labour and the Governor feared they would cause trouble. The planters were ordered to support these coolies even though they refused to work anymore.<sup>18</sup> The action taken by the Indians and by others on their behalf was effective enough to ensure the suspension of the scheme for a number of years.

This episode of protest heralded the resistance offered by subsequent thousands of Indentured servants who confronted the plantocracy in their relentless efforts to keep the coolies under the yoke of labour manipulation and colonial repressive (including military) control.

Robert Moore<sup>19</sup> argues that "... violent attempts at change from below take place when the degree of acceptance which those at the bottom accord the system erodes." Like the slaves before them who attempted on many occasions to challenge a system which they considered unacceptable, the indentured servants on the sugar estates were forced to challenge what was called the "elaborate system of coercion"<sup>20</sup> which characterised the Indentureship system. Many of the methods aimed at keeping the workers under strict control — "laws curtailing freedom of movement, flogging and beating on some estates, withholding of wages, imprisonment and the concomitant extension of the period of

'industrial residence' <sup>21</sup> survived from the period of slavery.

Within this context, therefore, it might not be appropriate to compare slave insurgency with indentured insurgency in British Guiana. Ramnarine posits that "the plantations of Guyana had always been afflicted with insurrections and general unrest". <sup>22</sup> Landmarks in slave insurgency are recorded in the slave revolts of 1731, 1741, 1762 and 1814; the serious rebellions of 1763 in Berbice and 1823 in Demerara; and the strikes of 1842 and 1847-48 <sup>23</sup> conducted by the ex-slaves. Although the indentured labourers did not match this record of resistance and revolt, their resistance was perhaps equally vehement. For the purpose of comparing motives for resistance, it is necessary to identify at least one significant difference. The indentured servant knew that one day his indenture would be cancelled and the master would no longer have a hold over him. "It was this expectation rather than any dream of escape or revolt, which gave the coolie hope". <sup>24</sup> Despite this expectation of relative freedom at a given time, the indentured servant was forced to adopt, all too frequently, some form of resistance — either passive or active — to what was called by Chief Justice Beaumont "the intolerable oppressions to which the immigrants were subject." <sup>25</sup>

It is necessary to examine the nature of the control structure utilised by the plantation owners. In order to understand the process of legislation facilitating the retention of the coolies on the estate as a pliable and amenable labour force, one has

to appreciate the sweeping powers enjoyed by the local planters - dominated government and its ability to function, with some measure of independence from the controlling influences, such as they were, exercised by the Colonial Office. The indentured servant was governed by a series of Ordinances <sup>26</sup> which were enacted by the local legislature. In their quest to create a large enough labour reservoir in order to reap the benefits inherent in a labour-surplus situation, the planters "consistently rationalised immigration as imperative on account of 'labour shortage' which supposedly prevailed from Emancipation until after the first World War. Their explanation was usually in blatant contradiction with reality". <sup>27</sup> Despite resounding cries of "ruin" due to labour shortage, the fact was that the planters' recapture of command of the labour market, "which they had lost in the decade after Emancipation", <sup>28</sup> had become apparent as early as the early 1860's. <sup>29</sup>

This surplus labour situation held many implications for the indentured servants. Whereas originally Indian indentured labour was the "cornerstone of the policy to hold wage levels and keep the workforce on a tight rein", <sup>30</sup> the coolie now found himself competing for employment with the freed Blacks, ex-indentured servants and other immigrants. The coolie was now in the peculiar position of under-cutting his own wage levels and thus bringing to reality, the prediction that "the whole scheme would degenerate to jew-jobbing and crimping, thus reviving most of the horrors of slavery". <sup>31</sup> All of this succeeded to a large extent in rendering the inden-

tured servant helpless in the face of blatant exploitation of his labour.

Furthermore, the planters used their control of the legal and political instruments of society, which control derived from their economic dominance, and also reinforced it, to pass laws which between 1855 and 1870 resulted in a "tightening of the controls governing work, wages and freedom of movement".<sup>32</sup> Ordinance Number 7, 1854 which governed the immigrant from the time of his arrival in the colony, was modified, no doubt "improved" as far as the planter was concerned, in the following years by "progressively more stringent controls governing the labour and earnings of those under indenture"<sup>33</sup>

Perhaps the most iniquitous of these laws were those concerned with the "task". The task was quite arbitrarily decided to mean the output of "effective" hands during slavery and was used as the minimum production level to be attained by each indentured servant five times per week. The 1870 Commission of Inquiry acknowledged the fact that even under normal conditions, an East Indian could not perform one task per day, and further said that no real definition was given for a day's labour or a 'task'.<sup>34</sup> The employer thus made the final decision as to what constituted work well done or work to be repeated because of neglect which could incur punishment under the law.

When no convictions could be obtained under the labour laws for the non-completion of the "task", Ordinance 9 of 1868 was "hastily prepared and passed to reinstate task work upon a legal footing."<sup>35</sup>

For the five years ending 30 June, 1870, the consolidated returns show that a total of 32,876 charges were brought against immigrants. The Commissioners of Inquiry found that of these "certainly not a hundred, perhaps not a score, were cases by immigrants, or by others on their behalf, against employers".<sup>36</sup> They further noted that "the number of charges brought by officials, Immigration Officials employed to "protect" the coolies against employers under the same Act may be almost counted on the fingers of one hand"<sup>37</sup> and concluded that "the immigrants must inevitably look upon the court as a place for doing justice rather upon them than to them".

TABLE B: CASES BROUGHT UNDER IMMIGRATION LAWS (1865 - 1869)<sup>38</sup>

YEAR	No. of Cases against Indentured servants
1865-66	6,280
1866-67	6,148
1867-68	6,190
1868-69	6,388
1869-June 30, 1870	7,870
5 Years	32,876

The Commissioners concluded furthermore by saying that the harsh system of laws was "kept up not so much for use, as that condonation of offences under it might be bartered against re-indenture"<sup>39</sup> The law was therefore invoked at any time against immigrants and against anyone the planters wished to punish for any reason.

The planters resorted to court action "sometimes as a means of labour discipline, sometimes directly as punishment, and often as a threat to secure docility in the future".<sup>40</sup>

The conduct of the trials was also a source of deep discontent. Given the inherent class and language barriers, the indentured servants in court were by and large in unknown and friendless territory. They were tried by Stipendiary magistrates,<sup>41</sup> the independence of whom they had every reason to question. The Commission noted that they had "insensibly acquired that awe of the powerful planting interest"<sup>42</sup> which had permeated the fabric of the entire society. For the immigrants, prosecution became almost synonymous with conviction and sentence. In addition "no appeal whatever was accorded to the labourer when convicted".<sup>43</sup>

Both the letter and the spirit of the law, therefore, ensured that the indentured immigrant was bound to his daily task of work, the non-performance of which made him subject to loss of wage, exorbitant fines or punishment in goal. Each conviction carried a maximum penalty under Ordinance 7, 1854, of up to twenty-four dollars or one month in jail with hard labour. When one considers that wages hardly reaches one dollar per week average work of ordinary effective hands,<sup>44</sup> it is easy to see that the one-month in jail was no longer an alternative but, to all intents and purposes, the substantial sentence.

Equally as disastrous as the planter — stipendiary magistrate alliance, was the

influence wielded by the planters over the doctors. Coming from the same stratum of society the doctors were nominally appointed "to retain as patients in hospital all sick immigrants and to order for them at the estate's expense, nourishing food and medicine";<sup>45</sup> but the Des Voeux letter accused them of excessive dependence on the will of the managers. The Commission found that, of the great numbers who were weekly sent to jail for breach of contract, "a very considerable proportion are convicted of neglecting to do what they were physically incapable of doing".<sup>46</sup> The magistrate had the discretionary power of declining to convict if he felt that the accused was incapable of working. The medical inspector could also invoke the law in the cases of neglect for the sick or poor hospital facilities. The commission was forced to note that Dr. John Shier had never "enforced an observation of his instructions by means of law".<sup>47</sup>

Another major irritation which sowed the seeds of discontent was the law governing freedom of movement — the "pass" laws. The planters seemed to fear conspiracy and combination to resist at every turn. Even when indentured immigrants were on legitimate visits, to purchase food, to visit sick friends or relatives, or to consult a lawyer or the Immigration Agent General, they were apprehended without warrant — often by Black policemen "displaying rather a good-natured contempt for the Coolie man".<sup>48</sup> (The use of Black policemen to deal with infractions of the labour and pass laws and the use of coolies to break the Afro-Guyanese strike of 1847-48 were

important elements in the incubation of racial animosity. This held important implications for future Indian-Black relations especially at times of Coolie disturbances). The pass laws were used as a screw; passes were given to those who behaved well. <sup>49</sup> Many Indentured servants were turned back, crestfallen and frustrated, at the La Penitence Bridge (one of the places used as a check-point) after trudging many miles, sometimes with children or goods on their shoulders. Even these relatively innocent attempts to seek temporary freedom from the toil and discipline of the estates were thwarted. The immigrants understandably found these and other abuses "galling or oppressive". <sup>50</sup>

But the growing disaffection was not derived only from the unjust and cruel "pass" and "task" laws. The one punishment which the indentured perhaps found most unbearable was the withholding or stoppage of his pay. Even more than imprisonment, stoppage of pay was "the cornerstone of the employer's power over them; it is the basis of much of the dissatisfaction and suffering which occurs amongst the Immigrants". <sup>51</sup> The indentured servant suffered as the result of a very simple process. A driver threatens a labourer that he will "shut out" or "throw out" the labourer's work. The labourer works on and goes as usual to the pay office where, when his name is called he is told that his pay was stopped. If he submits he takes what little is offered. If he speaks for his right or remonstrates he is hustled away or, as is likely, charged with disorderly conduct, or abusive language, or assault. No pay meant

either the incurring of debt through borrowing with interest, or no food, hence resort to larceny of plantations or livestock. If he seeks redress in the courts, which was a very expensive undertaking, he ran the risk of losing his case since, invariably, he might not get any others to appear and speak on his behalf for fear of inviting the wrath of his employer. <sup>52</sup>

Justice Beaumont sums up the predicament of the Indentured servant thus:

Practically an Immigrant is in the hands of the Employer to whom he is bound. He can not leave him; he cannot live without work; he can only get such work and on such terms as the employer chooses to set him; and all the necessities are enforced not only by the inevitable influence of his isolated and dependent position, but by the terrors of imprisonment and the prospect of losing both favours and wages. <sup>53</sup>

According to Stipendiary Magistrate Des Voeux, "the law had been so framed and its net covering all possible offences, was woven so closely, that not even the smallest peccadilloes could escape its meshes". <sup>54</sup> The majority of complaints concerned arbitrary deductions and stoppage of wages. Ordinance Number 9, 1868 permitted the employer to stop all wages for badly done or incomplete work.

Apart from these causes of dissatisfaction to the coolies, Des Voeux in his letter to Lord Granville which caused the Commission of Inquiry to be set up, exposed such ills as the illegal arrest of immigrants merely upon the orders of magistrates; the trial, *en bloc*, of immigrants charged with neglect of work, for more rapid disposal of cases; the "turning out" of immigrants to work which included forcing



their doors and giving them a "shove" along the way; and the not un-common practice to "enforce from the immigrants (in spite of the law) from sixteen and twenty hours work in the sugar-house." <sup>55</sup> Another major cause of discontent was the "interference with women on the estate" <sup>56</sup>

The indentured coolie, like the Black slave before him, was forced to challenge, both overtly and covertly, those structures of labour control and exploitation designed and enforced by a self-serving white planocracy. Any docile submission on the part of those in Indentured Servitude would be in direct contradiction to their constant quest to win for themselves, gains in terms of wages and conditions of labour, and thus to ensure a higher quality of life. Later an attempt would be made to show that improvements, such as they were, were won at much cost, after much struggle, and were not handouts from a benevolent plantocracy and colonial government.

During the early years (1838-69) while the system was being set and the Ordinances were being made more and more repressive, the Indentured immigrants were content to make humble petitions to the Governor. Unfortunately, these protests and petitions "were treated politely but not seriously by the imperial government". The use of petitions proved to be too mild a form of protest and possessed mere token value.

"The coolie must accept or stirke". <sup>58</sup> After the initial disruption at Leonora in August 1869, there was hardly a year which was not marked by serious strikes. When one considers that it was illegal for

an indentured labourer to strike (he was compelled to finish his task and then enter a formal complaint) and as such every strike was labelled a "riot" or "disturbance" which could be brought under control through the use of armed police, it becomes clear that the indentured labourer was, by and large, hardly shackled by fear and docility in his response to the exploitation of his labour.

By the end of the 1860's the Indentured immigrant was becoming more aware of the coercive and oppressive nature of the machinery of planter control. There are many reasons for the first serious confrontation which took place in 1869 but one significant factor seems to be the departure from the colony of Governor Hincks on 13 February, 1869. "The stelling was lined with an unusually large number of the most wealthy and influential gentlemen in the colony". <sup>59</sup> The departure of this decidedly pro-planter governor seemed to free-up much of the hitherto repressed discontent of the indentured labourers. By July <sup>60</sup> of the same year, this discontent made itself felt at La Jalousie and then Leonora. It would seem, however, that the important material basis for most of the disturbances during the Indenture period was related to a boast prevalent in those times. Des Voeux had charged in his letter that some managers were publicly stating that "the immigrants on their estates shall be always during the hours of work, either actually at work, or in hospital or in jail." <sup>61</sup> The Commission itself substantiated the truth of the report of this charge when it found that the phrase had enjoyed some popularity by

those managers, "who pride themselves upon being strict disciplinarians" <sup>62</sup> and said that "if stated in this bold form, and literally acted upon, it must create a good deal of oppression". <sup>63</sup>

The fact that this boast was all too frequently "literally acted upon" in a

system of control which lent it substance, forms the basis for some observations about the resistance it engendered and the armed suppression of that resistance from the time of the Leonora Riots of 1869 up to 1913 when very serious Riots took place at Rose Hall.



**EAST** East Indian Indentured labourers cutting sugar-cane.

**PROVISIONAL CHRONOLOGY OF INDENTURED INSURGENT  
ACTION ON THE SUGAR ESTATES OF B.G. ( 1869 – 1913)**

1869	—	Leonora; La Jalousie
1872	—	Devonshire Castle ( 5 killed); Anna Regina; Hampton Court.
1873	—	Skeldon; Uitvlugt; Eliza and Mary.
1879	—	Skeldon
1888	—	Enmore; Versailles
1894	—	La Bonne Mere; Success; Leguan; Farm.
1896	—	Non Pareil ( 5 killed).
1899	—	Golden Fleece; Mon Repos; Blairmont; De Kinderen.
1903	—	Friends ( 8 killed); Peter's Hall; Diamond; Wales.
1912	—	Friends (1 killed); Lusignan ( 1 killed)
1913	—	Rose Hall ( 15 killed).

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23 Ironically, the 1847-48 strike lost much of its effectiveness because of the use of Indian Indentured Servants and other immigrants as scabs.

24 Tinker, p. 231.

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27 Rodney, p. 13.

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**PRESENTING THE PAST IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE PRESENT**



## PULANDAR KANDHI

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